

British and Ecuadorian authorities in talks to evict Julian Assange from London embassy

By Oscar Grenfell
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The London-based *Times* newspaper reported yesterday that the British and Ecuadorian governments have been holding secret discussions on plans to evict WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange from Ecuador's London embassy, where he sought political asylum six years ago.

The article said the talks are “an attempt to remove Assange” from the embassy and are being conducted at the highest levels of government, with British Foreign Office Minister Sir Alan Duncan personally involved.

The report is the latest public indication of a conspiracy, involving the British, US and Ecuadorian governments, to terminate Assange's political asylum, in violation of international law, and force him into UK custody. The major powers are determined to prosecute the WikiLeaks editor for his organisation's role in exposing US-led war crimes and diplomatic intrigues around the world.

The *Times* noted that the talks have been taking place prior to a British visit by Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno scheduled for the end of this month. Since elections last year, Moreno has escalated the rightward turn initiated by his predecessor Rafael Correa. He is deepening economic and military ties with the US and Britain and has denounced Assange as a “hacker,” a “stone in our shoe” and “our inherited problem.”

The *Times* report included further indications of the immense pressure that has been placed on the Ecuadorian government by the US and Britain. It cited sources close to Assange, who said that the US threatened to scuttle a major loan from the International Monetary Fund to Ecuador if Quito did not expel Assange from its embassy.

Last month, US Vice President Mike Pence travelled to Ecuador as part of a broader regional tour aimed at shoring up Washington's faltering dominance in Latin

America. The talks publicly centred on drawing Ecuador into the US economic and military campaign against Venezuela. There is little doubt, however, that the persecution of Assange was a prominent item of closed-room discussions.

On the eve of Pence's departure, 10 prominent Democratic Party senators issued an open letter calling on the vice president to demand that Moreno oust Assange. This brazen call for the state persecution of a political refugee was an indication of a feverish campaign in US ruling circles to force Assange into their clutches.

The Ecuadorian government has repeatedly bowed to the demands of the major powers. In March, it cut-off Assange's internet access and his right to receive visitors, aside from occasional legal briefings, in an attempt to create conditions so intolerable that he will voluntarily leave the embassy. According to WikiLeaks associates, Ecuador has developed a “hostile climate” for Assange within the building, including by instructing embassy staff not to approach or speak to him.

Moreno and his foreign minister, the US-educated Jose Valencia, have publicly outlined a bogus conception of asylum that is conditional on Assange remaining silent on political developments, and have stated that his asylum will not “last forever.” The report that Ecuador is preparing to “evict” Assange makes clear the real meaning of Moreno's euphemistic admission last Thursday that his administration was negotiating with Britain to “resolve” the “issue” of Assange.

The Ecuadorian authorities are well aware that if they renege on Assange's asylum and force him out of the embassy, he will be arrested by British authorities on trumped-up bail charges stemming from his asylum-bid

in 2012.

The UK government of Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May has repeatedly refused to provide a guarantee that Assange will not be extradited to the US, where he likely faces espionage charges, carrying a maximum penalty of the death sentence.

The criminal character of the conspiracy against Assange was underscored in a ruling last Friday by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the official human rights protection body of the Organization of American States, of which Ecuador is a member.

Basing its ruling on international law, the court found that states are obligated to uphold the rights of asylum. The court declared that all states, including third parties, were required to provide safe passage to the nation that had granted asylum. It found that the principle of non-refoulement—banning the return of an asylum-seeker to a nation where they faced persecution—stood in all cases, including when diplomatic asylum was gained extraterritorially.

While it did not mention Assange, the court's ruling is a clear rebuke to the attempts to violate the WikiLeaks editor's asylum. Assange was granted unconditional political asylum by Ecuador in 2012 and was found by the United Nations to be suffering "arbitrary detention" in violation of international law in 2016.

In their attacks on Assange, the major powers are seeking to establish new precedents for the persecution of journalists, whistleblowers and political dissidents.

Geoffrey Robertson, a prominent legal authority and advisor to WikiLeaks, warned last week that the preparations by the Trump administration to prosecute Assange on espionage charges involved the creation of a "new legal theory" that would curtail the free speech protections of the US Constitution's First Amendment, by arguing that they did not extend to foreign journalists. He said that the defence of Assange was "moving up to be a major free press issue."

The attacks on Assange are one of the sharpest expressions of a turn to authoritarianism by governments around the world. Well aware that their program of militarism, war and austerity is opposed by the vast majority of the population, the ruling class is turning to the censorship of the internet, in an attempt to prevent workers and young people from accessing any alternative to the corporate and state-aligned

media.

Decades and centuries-long legal protections and democratic rights are being shredded, as governments prepare for police-state repression of mass social struggles against the drive to war, and the onslaught on the social rights of the working class. This makes clear that the defence of Assange is a critical issue for all supporters of democratic rights.

While the official parliamentary parties in every country, along with the pseudo-left organisations and the corporate media, are bitterly hostile to Assange, he is rightly viewed by millions of workers and young people as a courageous figure who has exposed war crimes and government conspiracies against the rights of the population.

The widespread sympathy for Assange must be mobilised and transformed into a mass political movement of the working class, demanding his immediate freedom and an end to his persecution.

In Britain, the demand must be raised that the May government drop its politically motivated bail charges. In Australia, the call must go out to force the federal Liberal-National government to uphold Assange's rights as a citizen, including by intervening to secure his return to Australia with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

In workplaces, factories, neighbourhoods and on university campuses, preparations must be made for mass political action, including protests, demonstrations, and strikes, if Assange is expelled from the Ecuadorian embassy and faces extradition to the US.

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